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Legislation to protect state parks on way to governor

LANSING – Legislation designed to protect Michigan's state parks is on its way to the governor, said bill sponsors Sens. Cameron S. Brown and Patty Birkholz.

"By sending this legislation to the governor we are sending a message to Michigan residents that our most treasured natural resources will not be sold off or squandered," Brown said. "It is long past time that our state parks are protected with the extensive legislative oversight and public input they deserve."

Under current law, there is no statutory oversight of state park lands, wilderness areas, natural areas or wild areas. Conceivably, the Department of Natural Resources director could declare any of these state properties surplus lands and put them up for sale.

Senate Bills 971 and 972 would establish an extensive four-tiered process of review before any sale of state park or wilderness area could be approved. The bills would prohibit the transfer or sale of state park land without the approval of the Natural Resources Commission, recommendation from the Citizens Committee for Michigan State Parks and notice and approval by the Legislature of a proposed sale.

Further, the DNR would be prohibited from designating as surplus-land any property within a state park or state recreation area.

"State parks are part of the natural beauty and history of Michigan and we need to prevent them from being destroyed for personal gain," said Birkholz, R-Saugatuck Township. "We cannot let our state parks casually be tossed aside as surplus and sold to the highest bidder for a retail establishment. This legislation will put in place accountability to preserve our parks for generations to enjoy."

In October 2005, the Mackinac Center for Public Policy published a document titled "Privatization in Michigan State Parks," which suggested that selling a number of state parks could generate revenue for the state. The paper listed 13 state parks and one state recreation area "that may be good candidates for private ownership." While the DNR has indicated they have no plans to sell any state parks, the Mackinac Center proposal raised concerns about a lack of legislative and public oversight.